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Interesting Opinion Piece On Strong Mayor Debate

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The following opinion piece appeared in the Friday, September 17, edition of The San Diego Union-Tribune. I think it provides some important insights into the "Strong Mayor" issue that will be decided by San Diego voters on November 2nd. It is reprinted here with the permission of both the author and the editorial board of the Union-Tribune.

I'm interested in your thoughts on this matter, so please feel free to email me any comments you have on this piece or the issue in general.

Sincerely,

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Considerations in the 'strong mayor' debate

By Robert J. O'Neill

September 17, 2004

The debate in San Diego about whether the city should change from the council-manager form of government to the mayor-council or "strong mayor" form needs to be an informed one so that residents can truly evaluate whether such a dramatic change is right for San Diego. Before the discussion goes any further, I want to correct some misconceptions advanced by those promoting the change.

Contrary to the assertion, the council-manager form of government works well in large cities and is the predominant form of government in the United States. Large cities in the United States, including Phoenix, San Antonio, San Jose, Dallas, Charlotte, N.C., and

Austin, have thrived under the council-manager structure for many years. Just this year, in fact, El Paso, Texas, a city of nearly 600,000 residents and still growing, adopted the council-manager form after decades of operating under the strong-mayor system. Also, more cities operate under the council-manager form of government than the mayor-council system: 48 percent to 43 percent. The facts are clear: the council-manager form of government isn't an obsolete system relegated to use in small towns.

Cities that operate under the council-manager form of government have a proven performance record that is generally superior to their "strong-mayor" counterparts. More than half of the 40 cities that received an AAA bond rating from both Moody's and Standard and Poor's, for example, operate under the council-manager form. The highest rated cities in the Government Performance Project conducted by Governing Magazine and Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs were council-manager cities.

The argument that the council-manager structure lacks accountability because an unelected manager runs the city is simply not valid. Under council-manager government, it is the elected mayor and elected city council members who govern the city, establish policy and set the agenda and direction for the city's future. The mayor and council are in control of the city government first, last and always. The city manager oversees the daily administration and delivery of services, serving at the direction and pleasure of the mayor and council. In reality, the manager is evaluated on accountability, responsiveness and leadership at each and every council meeting.

The switch from council-manager to the strong-mayor form would mean a shift of power away from a "council of nine" to a "mayor of one," essentially removing the voice of the city's neighborhoods and reducing the effectiveness of individual council members to work for their constituents. Under the proposed strong-mayor form, the mayor would have the authority to prepare the budget; provide services; veto council decisions; hire and fire the city manager; and fire the police chief, fire chief and auditor, subject to council approval. It's a significant transfer of power and authority the effect of which could be less responsiveness, not more, to the needs of city residents and their neighborhoods.

The proposed change to a mayor-council structure will have an impact on the management of the city as well. Under the current council-manager structure, the city manager is hired by the mayor and council and is accountable to all. City managers are nonpartisan professionals, many of whom subscribe to a stringently enforced code of professional ethics, who are motivated by a desire to build stronger communities, not politics. Under the strong-mayor proposal, the mayor hires the city manager, making the manager accountable only to the mayor.

Simple solutions are often well meaning but wrong. San Diego's best course of action is to act thoughtfully based on an open process of public deliberation that matches appropriate solutions with a clear diagnosis of the true underlying problems.

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